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SUBJECT: BILATERAL SECURITY AND COUNTERNARCOTICS DEBATED IN GUADALAJARA

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¶11. Summary: Two days of scholarly discussions in Guadalajara on security issues and counter-narcotics challenges elaborated convergent and divergent points in our bilateral relationship. While we don't share the same world vision, the Merida Initiative may be one concrete action on which the U.S. and Mexico can agree to improve the lives of people on both sides of the border. End summary.

¶12. Twenty academics seated around a table at the University of Guadalajara Club won't solve the problem of U.S.-Mexico security relations or effective counternarcotics operations, but their analysis highlighted the opportunities and challenges we face, especially in mounting a successful Merida Initiative. The mix of international and local experts, most with significant experience north of the border, was brought together by the University of Guadalajara on February 21-22, assisted by the Security Study Group of the Mexican Center for Economics Research and Teaching (CIDE) and the College of Mexico (COLMEX), both of Mexico City. These scholars specialize in U.S.-Mexican bilateral relations and Mexican security and democracy. They know each other well, so the exchange was open and friendly.

Not singing from the same sheet of music

¶13. Dissecting "U.S.-Mexico Security Relations" at the first day's session, the speakers compared the U.S. and Mexican national security views. They noted that Mexico's introspective view and often anti-U.S. attitude has kept it out of the international security arena. Mexican politics are domestic and nationalist, pushing security policy in that direction. Because the U.S. concept of national security is global, coordinating bilateral efforts is difficult at best. Each country defines its threats differently, which has been a stumbling block since 9/11.

¶14. Craig Deare of the National Defense University commented that U.S. border security often has a public safety focus, while border security constitutes international security for Mexico. U.S. public opinion of Latin America tends to be homogenous, although each country has its own concept of security with no regional integration to speak of. One example of different frames of reference is arms trafficking. The Mexican military handles weapons registration south of the border, while the civilian Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms does it in the U.S. Another participant mentioned that digging tunnels under the border is considered a crime in the U.S., but not on the other side of the border.

The neighbors' dilemma

15. Several academics focused on the problem of balancing security and development at the border. In recent years while the U.S. focused on terrorism and immigration, narcotrafficking and arms trafficking has grown, dragging down the border towns. If the majority of crossers to the U.S. (daily workers and shoppers) are not a security risk, they asked, why can't we develop a more user-friendly system? Mexico and the U.S. need to plan together better, dealing with corruption and other structural problems. And Mexico needs to develop its own concept of national security in order to respond to border and other security issues.

Merida Initiative musings

16. When the discussion turned to the Merida Initiative, opinions ranged from fears about U.S. forces operating on Mexican soil to praise for the U.S. Congress' conditions that would bring bilateral cooperation above board and require evaluation of Mexican military participation. Another scholar drew a comparison with NAFTA, that Mexico risked having its fate decided in Washington. The limits of U.S.-Mexican cooperation must also be defined. Others expressed concern about the Mexican actors and the non-existent relationship between Mexican civil and military forces, along with possible human rights abuses. However, the overall tone regarding the Merida Initiative was positive. For the first time, the Initiative lays out a shared priority -- narcotrafficking.

Media taking the punches

17. The next day's session on "National Security, Narcotrafficking and the Media" invited national and local reporters to give their perspectives on the Mexican situation.

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Since the kidnapping and murder of Guadalajara DEA agent Kiki Camarena in 1985, journalists played an increasingly larger role in the low-intensity counter-narcotics war, facing increasing danger. Now, with internet news outlets and events in the Middle East, many international correspondents have left Mexico to cover other world tragedies. The huge risks, impunity of public officials and lack of trust between the media and government (and military) make it extremely difficult for the press to function as the fourth pillar of power. One journalist expressed concern that the Merida Initiative would create the same problems in Mexico as in Colombia for journalists' access to information. Others commented more broadly on the need for journalists to address the violence in Mexican society created by narcotrafficking and try to reverse the culture that accepts violence and polarizes society.

Comment

18. This healthy exchange of academic research and opinions avoided U.S.-bashing and brought important points to the table. The specialists closely following the Merida Initiative debate noted that it has helped draw U.S. attention to Mexico (for example, that Senator Lugar focused his recent remarks on the arms flow to Mexico). Given sporadic protests over military operations against narcotics trafficking and doubts about the U.S. and Mexican governments' plans, bilateral cooperation is still quite controversial. If these academic discussions can play a role in informing policy and public outreach, we might make some progress together. End comment.

RAMOTOWSKI